With Gilbert Mary Anne's Love

12

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE

INDEPENDENT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

SAVANNAH, MAY 14th, 1848.

BY W. PRESTON, PASTOR.

SAVANNAH:
EDWARD J. PURSE, PRINTER,
No. 102 Bryan-Street — Up Stairs.
1848.

SAVANNAH, MAY 15th, 1848.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR:

Believing that your Discourse of yesterday morning would, if circulated in pamphlet form among your people, be, under Divine Providence, productive of an enduring good in the abatement of that great evil,—"*Evil Speaking*"—the undernamed members of your charge, respectfully request you to place with them a copy of the manuscript for publication.

CHARLES GREEN,
WILLIAM DUNCAN,
JOHN W. ANDERSON,
B. B. HOPKINS,
D. D. COPP,
JOHN STODDARD,
ROBERT HUTCHISON.

The Reverend Dr. PRESTON,
Pastor of the Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah.

SAVANNAH, MAY 16th, 1848.

GENTLEMEN:

In complying with your request, conveyed in your note of the 15th inst., I deem it proper to say that the Discourse to which you refer was prepared as an ordinary exercise of the Sabbath, and without the remotest idea of publication, and that the manuscript is placed at your disposal without an hour's leisure to revise it.

Respectfully and affectionately,

W. PRESTON.

To Messrs. Charles Green, William Duncan, John W. Anderson, B. B. Hopkins, D. D. Copp, John Stoddard, Robert Hutchison.

SERMON.

"But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."—MATTHEW 12: 36, 37.

The discourse of our Savior, of which the text is the closing part, was delivered in reply to the malignant charge which the Scribes and Pharisees brought against him, on seeing him perform a miracle on one possessed of a devil,—"This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils." This charge, I need not say, the Savior triumphantly refuted, and closed his reproof of their daring wickedness with a solemn appeal to the Judgment, and the ground on which the decisions of the last day would be made to rest: "I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." To the *words* therefore which men utter, a most solemn and fearful importance is attached, as they bear on the account which they must render at the final Judgment, and on their eternal condition.

The object of this discourse is to consider them in that relation.

First. The words which men utter *may* involve the great and awful crime of the sin against the Holy Ghost—the unpardonable sin. Such was their character, and such the irretrievable consequence, in the case to

which the Savior here refers; although in the text he evidently gave to them a broader application, without necessarily involving the same fearful result.

Having repelled the charge of the Scribes and Pharisees, the Savior adds: "Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come." Two other Evangelists have recorded the same awful truth, in nearly the same words, and the other has referred to it as the sin unto death. Without enquiring particularly into the nature of this sin, we may remark, that the terms, *blasphemeth*, *speaketh against*, and *speaketh a word against*, have precisely the same meaning. The only point of enquiry now is, can that sin be committed without giving *utterance* to the bitter feelings of the heart? Words alone do not *constitute* that crime; but are they not necessary to *consummate* it?

In the numerous instances in which the original words occur in the New Testament, utterance is either expressly shown by other explanatory words, or necessarily implied from the circumstances of the case, and as they literally signify. The crime of blasphemy cannot be committed in the heart only; although it implies a desperately depraved state of the heart — a peculiar bitterness and malignity of feeling against God. But while it is confined to the heart — while there is no verbal expression of that bitter malignity, as directly aimed against the Holy Ghost, or, as some suppose, against the Divine nature, without reference to its personality, (a point not involved in the present discussion,)—it is not, I apprehend, the unpardonable sin. Such a state would come under the general description of unsanctified human nature, although pos-

sessing peculiar aggravation: "The carnal mind is enmity against God." There must be bitter hatred in the heart, and that hatred must be expressed in words, oral or written, or some equally significant, understood sign.

Mark has given us the very words by which the Pharisees committed the unpardonable sin: "Because they *said* he hath an unclean spirit." And how else could they have ascribed the miracle of Christ to Beelzebub, or a satanic power? Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost is not a crime, like murder, and many other crimes, which may be committed in the heart without any external expression: for "He that hateth his brother is a murderer." Words, therefore, *may* involve, may consummate the crime of the unpardonable sin.

But our Savior did not limit all that he said on that occasion to those unhappy men who had committed that sin unto death, nor to the actual perpetration of that crime. He proceeds, and evidently by way of solemn caution to others, to shew the *tendency* of a certain class of words to the commission of that unpardonable offence: "I say unto you that every *idle* word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." There is here, evidently, a double or two-fold meaning to the word rendered *idle* — one its literal, the other its constructive meaning. It literally signifies vain, useless, inconsiderate, thoughtless. But its constructive meaning, as shewn from its direct reference to the case then under consideration, the crime of the Pharisees which occasioned this discourse of the Savior, and from its close connection with that crime, is to be understood in a much higher sense than its literal one — namely, false, malicious, contemptuous, despiteful, calumnious. There is then, and the Savior would seem to have intended to express this idea in using the word, a tendency in idle expressions to the commission of the unpardonable sin, when the Holy Ghost, or any of his special operations, are the subjects of remark; a sin which may be committed now, as well as when

Christ was on earth. And probably multitudes in the time of a revival of religion have, in this very way, approached near to that line which, when once passed, cannot be repassed. Not a few probably, have at such times taken that fearful step. An inconsiderate remark is an approach to it — ridicule, a nearer advance. Men are answerable for the evil *tendency* of what they do and say, as well as for the sins which they actually commit, and especially when forewarned of that tendency. The Savior here taught that an idle word *might* become an expression of malignity, by using a term embracing both significations, and hence place the sinner who utters it beyond hope, and to enforce his remark, appeals to the day of judgment: "I say unto you that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment."

But our Savior proceeds to give a still more comprehensive meaning, a wider range to the term, words: "For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Hence, I remark,

Secondly, that words are the index and exponent of moral character, and furnish proper ground for determining the eternal destiny of the soul. As God sees and judges, they are an infallible expression of the state of the heart. For, however men may disguise or conceal their views and feelings from their fellow-men, they can practise no deception — throw no covering around them — which the eye of Omniscience does not detect and penetrate. David expressed this perfect knowledge of God when he said: "O, Lord, thou hast searched me and known me. Thou understandest my thought afar off. — There is not a word in my tongue, but thou, O Lord, knowest it altogether." God often sees that their real meaning is the exact opposite to what they would have their fellow beings understand. And when men are under no restraints — when they are free from all intention to deceive others — their words are the just expressions of

their real sentiments and feelings. So said the Savior in the very case before us: "O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, *speak* good things? for out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh." Nor was this peculiar to those whom he was addressing, or those of like character: "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things."

It is a truth running through all the Bible, that the state of the heart decides the moral character of the man: "The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart." Words are the natural expression of the heart. Relieved from all restraints, the former are the just interpreters of the latter. In the sight of God, who knows the impulse in the heart to every expression of the lips, although to man the one may often contradict the other, there is an infallible agreement. The principle of judgment, therefore, laid down in the text, is a just and righteous one: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Could every word which a person utters be recalled, and the motive or impulse to its utterance impartially reviewed, as we are taught it will be in the Judgment, there would be a full and perfect exhibition of his moral character. Every expression will, on that day, be seen to have proceeded from a good or an evil heart. What then can furnish testimony of moral character and moral desert so full and complete as our words, or what be juster ground of approbation or condemnation in the Judgment?

But since the Savior did not restrict his meaning to the particular case which called forth his remarks, but extended it to cases not necessarily involving the unpardonable sin — to idle, as well as malicious words, and to the issues of a good, as well as an evil heart, so we may properly regard the text,

Thirdly, as referring to the *tongue*, as in an eminent sense the instrument either of good or of evil. God has not endowed man with a more important faculty than that of speech — none by which he exerts an influence so powerful and extensive — none so intimately connected with, so controlling over, all the energies and actions of his fellow beings. As the index of the mind, the revealer of the heart, the exponent of moral character, and the instrument of effecting the greatest good and the greatest evil in our world, well might our Savior say: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." For the whole account which men must render in the last day may be summed up under this one head — *their words*. Solomon tells us, that "*Death* and *life* are in the power of the tongue." It is on account of its controlling power over human conduct — of its pre-eminent influence in the formation and manifestation of moral character, and consequently of its fitting the soul for its eternal destiny, that our final Judge has made the decisions of the Judgment to depend on the employment of this faculty. To the same effect, he has told us by an Apostle: "If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man and able to bridle (or restrain from evil) the whole body; and he that will love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile." This is the *good;* but let us look at the *evil*, which proceeds from the same source, and as portrayed by the same pen: "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity; so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature, and it is set on fire of hell. For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed, of mankind. But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith, bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men which are made after the similitude of God."

These, I apprehend, are the leading points embraced in the text — the close and fearful connection of *words* with the unpardonable sin — their exposition of the heart — their controlling influence for the greatest good, or the greatest evil. What then furnishes ground of more equitable decision in the day of judgment than the words which men utter? And on that ground our final Judge has placed his decisions: "I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned."

But although the above remarks embrace all, or at least, the principal ideas, necessarily connected with the subject under consideration, and what the Savior, I conceive, intended to convey particularly in the text, yet our last topic, namely, the *power of the tongue*, for good or for evil, admits of a more extended illustration than it has yet received. And we cannot perhaps be more profitably employed than in pursuing it.

On the great purpose for which the power of speech was conferred on man, we need not dwell. Its highest excellence — its distinguishing glory — is its employment in celebrating the praise of Jehovah. The grandest themes which demand its exercise are his nature and perfections, as displayed by all the methods he has chosen by which to bring himself to the knowledge of men. Much of the service of God on earth, I need not say, is rendered by this faculty, while the bliss of heaven is set forth by its highest and unceasing employment. Connected with this, is the best good of our fellow beings — their instruction and salvation — their benefit in a thousand ways, by our counsels and exhortations, by expressions of kindness, and sympathy, and mutual affection: "A man hath joy by the answer of his mouth; and a word spoken in due season, how good is it! A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."

But this faculty is as potent for evil as it is for good. If it have saved, so has it destroyed multitudes of souls. If the tongue have been employed in celebrating the praises of God, so also has it in profaning that sacred name. If blessing proceed from the lips, so also cursing: "Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing." And this it would seem was true of some who even professed to be the disciples of the Holy Savior. For the Apostle adds: "My *brethren*, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive-berries? either a vine, figs? So can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh:" that is, such a man, whatever may be his profession, cannot be a christian. But if some, under all the restraints of a public profession of religion, and even of the decencies of life, can be found who fall under this weighty charge, what unnumbered multitudes, exempt from all these restraints, freely and habitually indulge in the horrid practice of oaths, and curses, and every form of profanity which can only come from a tongue which, as an Apostle expresses it, "is set on fire of hell." If some, we fear comparatively few, here learn and practice the first notes of that new song which is sung in heaven; alas, what a vast multitude of our race are fast perfecting themselves in those blasphemies which are poured forth from the wretched inmates of the eternal pit!

But it is not only their own souls that are ruined by this little but powerful instrument. Others are lured, and led on to destruction, in ways as various as the depravity of man has forms of manifesting itself. The very pulpit has been desecrated to the work of destroying the souls of men. False and fatal doctrines, pretending to be drawn from the oracles of God, and enforced by all the arts of rhetoric and eloquence, have been preached and received, and countless souls been beguiled to endless ruin.

But where these means have not been employed, nor such consequences to whole communities followed, the same fatal end has been reached in other ways and by other means in more limited circles, and by secret methods. Alas, how many victims to the arts of deception and seduction! How many promises made, intended, at the time of making them, to be broken! How much false swearing for various purposes of selfishness! Perjury, though an aggravated crime, committed under all the forms of a solemn, deliberate appeal to the omniscient God, the more effectually to support a falsehood, is no uncommon crime — a crime, however, of near approach to blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.

Nor are these the only ways in which the tongue produces immense mischief. It inflicts vast injury where its effects are not fatal to the soul. Its falsehoods often destroy all that is dear to a man in this life — his reputation, his good name, his character, his influence — and not unfrequently deprives him of his property, or prevents an honest acquisition of it. And in what a variety of ways is this done — by originating false reports, or circulating the vaguest rumors — by giving a partial, or distorted account of what actually occurred, unaccompanied with explanations which would often change an alledged wrong to justifiable right — the vice charged to praise-worthy virtue — by concealing what is commendable in the object of remark, and magnifying his faults — by spreading an injurious report, whether true or false, but carefully avoiding a personal and private interview with the supposed offender, as God's word and reason and even humanity demand — and to add weight and even keenness to the slander, there is often an *expression* of regret where there is evident satisfaction felt.

But it were a vain attempt to trace all the ways and methods by which the sins of the tongue are committed, and the injuries it inflicts both on him who commits them, and on their object and victim. And were the perpetra-

tor always one of an abandoned character, or notorious profligacy, the injury to the slandered and defamed were little, if injury at all. But, unhappily, it is not confined to such, at least, in its lesser aggravations. We have no reason to suppose that there have been no *professors of religion* who were too justly chargeable with the sins of the tongue, since the Apostle James wrote his epistle, in which we find that charge against some such. And yet in no department of human depravity, against none of its manifestations do we find so many pointed reproofs and solemn warnings and cautions, as against the sins of the tongue, of which we have given but a partial catalogue. Let me recite to you the following as mere specimens, and taken almost at a casual opening of God's word. I find the following question put by David: "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell on thy holy hill?" to which is appended the following answer: "He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh truth in his heart; he that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbor, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor." I find, too, the following prohibition and denunciation: "Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale-bearer among thy people. I am the Lord. Whoso privately slandereth his neighbor, him will I cut off, saith the Lord." "If any man among you seemeth to be religious and bridleth not his tongue, that man's religion is vain." These are mere specimens.

Of the power of this organ for good or evil — its prominence in forming the character — its universally controlling influence — we scarcely need proofs beyond daily observation.

The Apostle James has illustrated its power by two striking similitudes: "Behold we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body: Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the

governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth." Well, indeed, might the Savior assume as a just principle of judgment, and place the decisions of the last day, on the words of men: "By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." They, in an eminent manner, form and fit the character for the Judgment and eternity.

In conclusion, we can simply state some of the reflections suggested by our subject:

1. The caution, the circumspection, with which we should guard our words. We should utter them under the solemn impression of our accountability for them, and of their direct bearing on the decisions of the last day, and our unchangeable condition in eternity — that heaven or hell hang upon our lips — that they in a pre-eminent sense prepare the soul, and will be decisive witnesses for its justification or eternal condemnation. They may fix the sinner's awful doom, ere the hour of the body's death, and amid the richest abundance of the means of grace. For, "Whosoever speaketh a word against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come."

What a fearful responsibility — what solemn importance does this Divine announcement attach to the very words men utter. How careful to keep far away from that line, perhaps often unperceived till passed, but which once passed, admits not the possibility of return — from uttering *words* which forever preclude forgiveness. A false oath is a near approach to it; while the habit of profanity is but one step farther removed from it. An *idle* word, and especially a *profane* one, may easily grow into an expression of malignity. Or if it fall short of that horrid offence, let the profane man remember that his doom will be as certain, and it will be intolerable: "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who taketh his name in vain."

2. The only effectual cure or check of the sins of the tongue will be found in faithful, unceasing watchfulness over the heart: "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life." In the heart are found all the impulses and promptings to the utterance of the lips, and all the springs of moral actions. That is the source whence flow all that is good and all that is evil in our world. Love — the love of God and the love of our neighbor — furnishes the only remedy for the evils of the tongue. Let the fountain be purified, and its issuing streams will be pure. Were these principles allowed a full and free operation, how much of heaven would be enjoyed on earth! What evils of every name would be banished from our world! The human family would be one happy brotherhood. What a vast improvement in every smaller community over what the world has ever witnessed — in the neighborhood, the social circle, the family, and even the church of God! And while the evils are so great, and reformation so desirable, the necessary means and the indispensable agency are all provided. The sacred, precious word of God contains the one, and points us to the other, and tells us how we may obtain it. It is their combined efficiency that trains the soul for the bliss of heaven. The heart laid fully open to these appointed means, and this promised agency, the soul is transformed into the likeness of God, and fitted for the society of the glorified.

3. Our subject addresses to us the most powerful considerations which can possibly be conceived to have weight with beings destined to an immortal existence. What can be presumed to have force on the mind of an accountable being, if not the amazing scenes and momentous decisions of the final Judgment? if not the unalterable retributions of eternity? And these are the events to which the Great Judge himself points us in the text: "I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judg-

ment; For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." Both our hopes and fears are here addressed. The appeal comes from the very judgment-bar, and is echoed from heaven and hell. It fell from the same lips that will hereafter pronounce the joyful, and the fearful sentence, on an arraigned world: "Come ye blessed — Depart ye cursed."

We will not say to the blasphemer against the Holy Ghost, (God forbid that such a wretch should ever go from among us to his bar,) but we may say to him who takes the name of his Maker in vain — to the imprecator of curses on his fellow-men, to the profane swearer, the slanderer or the reviler, the defamer, the seducer, the originator, or relater of evil reports, think of that day — of those scenes — those decisions — that eternity! And let the thought appall and reform the individual on whom an unbiassed, faithful conscience shall fix the charge of either of those, or of kindred offences. And may we all be prepared to stand justified of the Judge of quick and dead in the last day, through his own infinite merits, and receive a welcome to Heaven. — AMEN.